ICR's Scientific Apprenticeship Conference: Building a Sustainable Technical Pipeline – Apprenticeships in Research

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Executive summary

The Institute of Cancer Research (ICR) London operates an award-winning apprenticeship programme for laboratory research technicians, delivered in partnership with Tiro and funded by a £1 million Wellcome grant awarded in September 2023. This pioneering initiative forms part of a national effort to strengthen career development for scientific research technicians by addressing recruitment and retention challenges, increasing diversity through outreach to underrepresented groups, and improving recognition of technician career paths in academia.

As part of the programme, ICR hosted the Scientific Apprenticeship Conference, titled 'Building a Sustainable Technical Pipeline: Apprenticeships in Research', which took place on the 15th of May 2025 at the Wellcome Collection in Euston, London. This gathering brought together representatives from various organisations who support science apprentices. The key aims of the conference were as follows:

1. Driving research culture to be more welcoming to apprentices and ensuring the sustainability of the technical talent pipeline.
2. Supporting organisations that offer technical apprenticeships by discussing best practices and challenges with industry leaders, such as AstraZeneca, Imperial College London, University College London and Charles River Laboratories.
3. Fostering collaboration between higher education institutes, research institutes and other scientific employers to create a cohesive and supportive ecosystem for apprenticeships.

The day-long event combined opening addresses from senior leaders including technical career experts, structured presentations on apprenticeship models delivered by representatives from major organisations, table discussions with over 20 research institutes and industry leaders covering drivers and challenges of apprenticeships. The event also included panel discussions with Q&A sessions, dedicated networking workshops for interactive discussions between delegates and concluding remarks summarising key takeaways and next steps. This format allowed for rich dialogue across different stages of apprenticeship development while providing ample networking opportunities for apprenticeship scheme managers, apprenticeship managers, talent development professionals, and organisational leaders.

Structured to enable diverse perspectives and rich discussions, the event captured successes, challenges and best practices in apprenticeships while providing valuable networking opportunities. The conference sought to foster meaningful collaboration between higher education institutes, research institutes and other scientific employers to create a cohesive and supportive ecosystem for apprenticeships.

Evidence presented at the conference indicated substantial demand for scientific apprenticeship pathways, demonstrating significant unmet workforce development potential. Nevertheless, persistent systemic challenges continue to constrain the widespread

implementation and scalability of these alternative career paths. Through shared discussion and knowledge sharing, the conference identified several barriers – categorised as cultural (entrenched academic paradigms), structural (misaligned institutional frameworks) and operational (implementation challenges) – while providing evidence-based examples of successful implementation models to strengthen the apprenticeship ecosystem across the research sector.

This conference was funded by the Wellcome Trust as part of ICR's Institutional Research Culture Award "Strengthening Career Pathways for Technicians", highlighting the importance of developing sustainable technical expertise in the scientific research community.

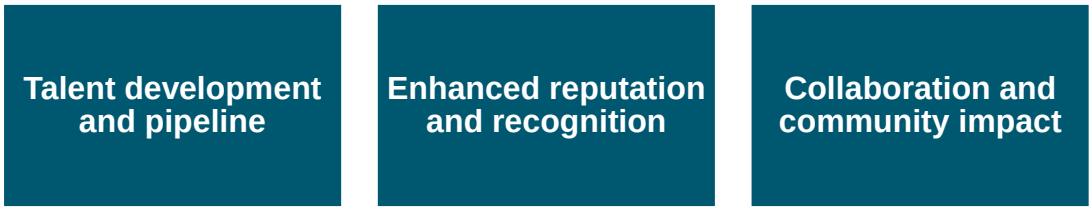
The conference represented an important step towards building a more inclusive and sustainable technical talent pipeline in scientific research. We extend our appreciation to all delegates who participated. The engagement, shared experiences and collaborative spirit were instrumental in addressing the conference's key objectives. The insights gained from industry leaders will be invaluable in shaping future initiatives in this field.

The remaining sections of this report outline the main findings of the opening and closing addresses, panel discussion, and table discussions, illustrated by participant quotations throughout.

1 Key themes and findings

1.1 Benefits of scientific apprenticeships

It is clear from the discussions that scientific apprenticeships address technical skill gaps while creating diverse talent pipelines, enhancing institutional reputation and fostering cross-sector collaboration. They bring fresh perspectives to research teams, with managers strongly advocating for apprentices' retention due to their valuable contributions.



1.1.1 Talent development and pipeline

It was evident from the event that scientific apprenticeships address technical capability gaps in research settings. They provide vocational routes into research careers and enable a more resilient and diverse talent pipeline. The National Apprenticeship Service (2018) reported that "apprenticeships offer the chance to gain valuable skills, higher earning potential and improved life chances. Higher and degree apprenticeships allow apprentices to gain university-level qualifications while working. Conference delegates were in strong agreement with this statement, and as outlined by one key speaker, apprenticeships can, "provide vocational routes, strengthen institutions' role and enable a resilient talent pipeline". They also offer alternative pathways to traditional academic routes, creating "different routes through industry".

Apprentices bring enthusiasm and fresh perspectives to research environments, with multiple colleagues describing them positively, for example, as "keen, eager and hardworking". Furthermore, it was reported by multiple delegates that apprenticeships offer a cost-effective way of upskilling the workforce, while providing development opportunities both for the apprentices and those working alongside them. Opportunities also exist for technical staff to be managers or mentors of apprentices, closely aligned with the theme of professional development within the Technician Commitment.

Overall, it is evident that apprentices make substantial contributions to immediate and wider teams, with line managers often advocating strongly for their retention.

1.1.2 Enhanced reputation and recognition

Organisations implementing apprenticeship programmes reported enhanced reputation through receiving excellence awards, for their tangible investment in people and skills development. As an example, the apprenticeship programme within ICR was recognised as one of the best practices in London in inclusive talent. Such recognition enhances

institutional standing in the sector while demonstrating commitment to workforce development.

1.1.3 Collaboration and community impact

The collaborative nature of apprenticeship programmes creates opportunities for working across industry boundaries and enables joint development initiatives. This strengthens an institution's role in skills development while contributing to the broader research ecosystem. Partnerships between academia and industry create valuable exchange points for knowledge and expertise, benefiting both sectors.

Apprenticeships have long been viewed as a driver for social mobility for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and a catalyst to reduce income inequality (Policy Connect, 2017). Furthermore, The Association of Apprentices (AoA) Big Apprentice Survey reveals that 36% of apprentices say they would not be working in their current industry without their apprenticeship programme, rising to 40% among those who received free school meals. This shows how apprenticeships serve as an important pathway for social mobility. Reflective of this, delegates highlighted that as well as bringing "diversity of thought" to research teams, apprenticeships attract candidates from different backgrounds, thereby, challenging traditional academic requirements, supporting local community engagement and providing opportunities for those who might not typically attend university.

Key benefits: summary

+ Apprenticeship programmes potentially address technical capability gaps in research settings.
+ Alternate pathways help create diverse and resilient talent pipelines.
+ Apprenticeships can enhance institutional reputation.
+ They also foster cross-sector collaboration between academia and industry.
+ Apprenticeship programmes have the potential to increase diversity by attracting candidates from varied backgrounds.

1.2 Key challenges

Research apprenticeships face substantial barriers despite their potential to diversify talent pathways. These include organisational challenges, insufficient funding mechanisms and administrative burdens. Career progression remains problematic with unclear advancement opportunities. Traditional HR practices create further obstacles through misaligned academic requirements that impede recruitment of technically capable candidates.

1.2.1 Organisational and structural barriers

Neil Walford (Deputy Director of Organisational Development, ICR) reported in his introduction that the "heart of research is the technician", highlighting their valuable contributions through technical skills, training, supervision and fostering "lab culture". However, despite this recognition, traditional academic career paths continue to dominate the research landscape, while technician and non-academic roles lack visibility and structured progression. Current research culture often rewards visibility through publications over broader technical contributions, often disadvantaging those in support or technical roles. Dr Nikolay Ogryzko, UK Research and Innovation Talent Programme Manager, emphasised that "people make research", yet many vital roles fall outside the visible career path in academia, highlighting the need for more diverse pathways. The long-established PhD model dominates thinking about research careers, but different models are needed to create alternative entry points and career progression routes. Apprenticeships offer one such alternative, providing a valuable route to diversify talent in research, but require shifts in institutional thinking and structures to achieve their full potential.

Apprenticeship programmes also face significant organisational barriers. These include a lack of long-term role planning, insufficient funding mechanisms and headcount allocation, and resource and time constraints. Multiple delegates noted that "roles do not exist" at the right job level, demonstrating "no forward thinking or planning" in many organisations. Stakeholders specifically expressed apprehension about "taking on an apprenticeship where there was no role at the end", highlighting the ethical dilemma of investing in talent development without secure pathways for continued employment. This uncertainty has created hesitancy among potential host organisations, limiting apprenticeship opportunities despite high demand. Conference delegates consistently emphasised that effective programmes often "start with the end in mind", especially when there is job uncertainty post-apprenticeship. The ICR maintains strong partnerships with industry and plays a key role in developing the next generation of cancer researchers, supporting apprentices to successfully transition to industry positions upon programme completion.

The lack of headcount allocation for apprentices was reported as problematic, with suggestions including tax breaks for employers and improved UK Apprenticeship Levy mechanisms to address these challenges. The UK Apprenticeship Levy, introduced in April 2017, is a government initiative aimed at funding apprenticeship training across the country. It applies to employers with an annual pay bill over £3 million, who must contribute 0.5% of their total pay bill to the levy. A £15,000 annual allowance is provided, effectively exempting the first £3 million of the payroll (GOV.UK, 2025). However, while the levy is available, it does not address the core challenge of funding salaries, which remains a significant barrier.

Lastly, the administrative burden of managing apprenticeships was also highlighted, with smaller organisations particularly struggling with the resource implications. It is important that organisations adopt a wider approach to this challenge and not leave administration responsibilities with individual managers.

1.2.2 Career progression and integration

Career pathway concerns persist, with unclear progression pathways, difficulty utilising the diverse skills gained and ongoing salary benchmarking problems. Many delegates noted the "mobilisation of knowledge" that apprentices develop, giving them "a wide range of skills" that existing roles may not fully utilise. Without proper career planning, this can lead to frustration and retention challenges. Regular reviews with apprentice's help ensure they remain on track with deadlines and development goals. The panel discussion emphasised that communication between employer, provider and apprentice is essential for programme success and developing clear pathways.

Integration and support remain challenging areas for apprentices. There is a clear need for community development among apprentices, support for the academic components of apprenticeships and effective management of expectations about career progression. Some delegates highlighted the isolation that apprentices can experience, noting the importance of creating an "apprentice community" with clear spaces to come together. Multiple apprentice networks do exist across the UK to connect apprentices such as the Association of Apprentices, the Black Apprentices Network, the Science Apprentice Forum and the Disabled Apprentice Network (DAN), and offer models of good practice which could be explored. Additionally, there are also several networks for apprenticeship managers such as the London & South Apprenticeship Lead Network and London & Southeast TCI Apprenticeship Sub-group. Delegates reported that cohort models where apprentices "grow together" would provide valuable peer support throughout the journey.

1.2.3 Recruitment and HR alignment

The recruitment process for apprenticeships is often complicated by traditional HR functions that are not aligned with apprenticeship needs. Traditional academic expectations (such as requiring high academic qualifications) remain, and there is a fundamental need to alter mindsets regarding apprentice recruitment and retention. Multiple delegates highlighted the need to "change thinking with HR" around degree requirements and consider different assessment methods. Recent reports (Lester, 2020; Social Mobility Commission, 2020)

have called for the promotion of apprenticeships and recruitment to reach diverse groups (including ethnicity, disability, and social deprivation), where individuals might not have typical university entry qualifications

Many noted that the current recruitment approaches create barriers, with one delegate describing how "HR functions are not aligned – the challenge arises when [applicants] do not have 4 A stars [at A-Level]". This mismatch between traditional academic requirements and the skills needed for success in technical roles was repeatedly identified as a barrier to diversifying the talent pool. The need to "change mindsets" was emphasised across several discussion groups. Delegates noted that the recruitment process and assessment centres need to focus on the individual rather than traditional academic criteria.

Key challenges: summary

+ Structural barriers persist as organisations need to consider long-term roles for apprentices, and struggle with insufficient funding mechanisms and headcount allocation.
+ While apprenticeships are a valuable way to build workforce capacity, they represent a longer-term investment. The time required to train apprentices often does not align with the short-term nature of grant funding cycles, which can create a barrier to uptake.
+ Administrative burdens particularly impact smaller institutions.
+ Career progression concerns include significant uncertainty about post-apprenticeship employment, poorly defined advancement pathways, systematic underutilisation of the diverse skills that apprentices develop and difficulties with appropriate salary benchmarking.
+ HR practices remain misaligned with apprenticeship needs, due to traditional academic requirements that create unnecessary barriers, recruitment processes designed for conventional academic roles and entrenched mindsets that resist alternative assessments.
+ Apprentices may feel isolated within academic environments, and further work is needed to design communities for increased peer connection.

1.3 The path forward

Throughout the conference, participants explored key themes essential to successful apprenticeship programmes. The discussions revealed a consensus on the need for systematic approaches to apprenticeship development, fair compensation and intentional community building. Delegates highlighted the importance of viewing apprenticeships not as isolated programmes but as integral components of a broader talent development strategy that strengthens the technical workforce across the scientific research sector.

Strategic planning for programme sustainability

Collaboration and advocacy for system change

Improving recruitment and retention practices

Building support systems and communities

1.3.1 Strategic planning for programme sustainability

Successful apprenticeship programmes begin with the end in mind, developing clear post-programme pathways for participants. Ailish Harikae – People and Organisational Development Consultant (Apprenticeships and Technical Staff Development) at Imperial College London – reported that their protocols of "standardised grading and job description" and departments planning 9 to 12 months ahead for opportunities was crucial. Their advice to employers included recommendations to "start with an exit", "create bridge opportunities across departments" and "celebrate the ending" of the apprenticeship to mark this milestone in development. It is clear from evidence gathered from delegates that organisations should plan ahead for transitions between roles and recognise that the apprenticeship may be one step in a longer career journey.

Standardising grading and job descriptions creates clearer progression paths and helps manage expectations for both apprentices and their managers. Creating permanent contracts from "day one" with clear salary progression upon completion was suggested as one approach to provide security and clear expectations.

1.3.2 Collaboration and advocacy for system change

The conference revealed strong potential for sharing best practices across institutions. Delegates discussed the development of industry rotation schemes and the importance of working across sector boundaries. Several group discussions identified "sharing best practice" as an area where collaboration could yield significant benefits, with one group of delegates suggesting organisations could "rotate in industry" to provide broader experiences for apprentices.

Collective advocacy for policy change at governmental level was identified as a priority to address structural barriers and funding challenges. Delegates suggested the need to "request change together" to have a stronger impact on policy and funding decisions.

Universities were identified as having "a role to play" in supporting apprenticeship pathways, with suggestions that there might be "less universities and the need for other ways of getting degrees" in the future. This reflects a recognition that traditional higher education institutions need to adapt to accommodate diverse learning pathways, including apprenticeships. The Student Academic Experience Survey (Advance HE, 2025) reported that current students are requesting more 'hands on' aspects on their chosen university programmes, urging universities to provide more real-life experiences outside traditional classroom teaching methods.

1.3.3 Improving recruitment and retention practices

Recruitment processes should focus on individual potential over formal qualifications. Organisations that have implemented practical skills assessments in recruitment report better outcomes. Within the ICR an assessment centre was used, with apprentices undertaking actual tasks from the role they were applying for. KCL also highlighted that practical tests are "very useful" since "apprentices often come from a different background".

Valuing diverse backgrounds and non-traditional entry routes enriches the talent pool and contributes to greater diversity in research settings. A fundamental shift in HR mindset beyond degree requirements is needed to support these changes. As one delegate noted, organisations need to "focus on the individual" rather than traditional credentials.

Retention strategies should recognise that "apprentices are performing core roles" and compensate them accordingly. Several participants advocated for "paying apprenticeship a 'normal wage'" to reflect their contributions. It was also reported that success measures should reflect the fact that not all apprentices are expected to remain in the organisation but may also progress to another professional role.

1.3.4 Building support systems and communities

Creating effective support systems was consistently identified as critical to apprenticeship success. Recommendations included developing a "buddy system – someone that is not the line manager" to provide additional support. Establishing regular "reviews with apprenticeships to ensure they are keeping on track with deadlines" helps maintain progress and address challenges early.

Building community among apprentices helps address isolation and provides peer support. Suggestions included creating cohorts "that [are] together and grow together" and developing an "apprentice community". The relationship between training providers and employers was highlighted as needing attention, with recommendations to "have a shared vision and co-creation of the journey", "promote mentoring/coaching", "create 'real world' scenarios" and ensure "visibility beyond the programme".

The conference also highlighted the value of cross-sector collaboration, creating bridges for apprentices to move between institutions (such as an ICR apprentice moving to AstraZeneca). Rotation schemes within and between organisations were suggested as potential solutions to broaden experience and increase post-apprenticeship opportunities.

The conference itself was recognised as a much-needed opportunity for people to come together and discover others facing similar challenges.

The path forward: summary

+ Successful programmes begin with clearly defined post-completion pathways, incorporating standardised job descriptions and grading structures.
+ Institutions should actively share best practices and develop cross-sector rotation schemes that provide broader experience, while collectively advocating for policy and funding changes.
+ Organisations must shift focus from formal qualifications to individual potential by implementing practical skills assessments in recruitment processes.
+ Offering competitive wages will help retain talent.
+ Embracing diverse backgrounds enhances inclusion and innovation in research settings.
+ Comprehensive support requires implementing buddy systems separate from line management, conducting regular progress reviews, and creating cohort-based communities that mitigate isolation.
+ Training providers and employers should establish a shared vision through ongoing dialogue and collaboration.

2 Recommendations

Based on the discussions and shared experiences at the conference, the recommendations in Table 1 have been developed to guide organisations in establishing and enhancing sustainable apprenticeship programmes in scientific research settings. These recommendations represent a synthesis of best practices from leading institutions including Imperial College London, KCL, ICR and AstraZeneca, as well as the collective knowledge of conference delegates from across the sector.

Organisations are encouraged to adapt these recommendations to their specific contexts, institutional cultures and available resources. The ultimate goal is to create apprenticeship pathways that not only meet immediate workforce needs but contribute to a sustainable technical talent pipeline that enriches the scientific research community as a whole.

Table 1: Recommendations for providers

Recommendations	Key action
Implement forward-thinking career planning	+ Design programmes with clearly defined post-completion pathways that specify potential roles and progression opportunities. + Standardise job descriptions and grading across disciplines to ensure consistency and facilitate movement between departments. + Prepare transition opportunities at least 9 to 12 months before programme completion. + Start with an "exit strategy" from day one that maps out potential career routes within and beyond the host organisation. + Create bridge opportunities across departments to maximise retention of developed talent. + Celebrate completion milestones to recognise achievement and mark career progression.
Reform organisational structures	+ Create permanent contracts with transparent salary progression scales tied to skill development and qualification attainment. + Establish appropriate headcount allocations for apprentices that do not compete with standard research positions. + Streamline administrative processes to reduce burden, particularly for smaller research institutions.

	+ Develop dedicated funding mechanisms, including potential tax breaks for employers and wider use of the UK Apprenticeship Levy. + Address the "roles do not exist" problem by developing new job families specifically for technical research careers. + Implement resource planning those accounts for both supervision time and apprentice development needs.
Transform recruitment practices	+ Shift focus from academic qualifications to practical skills assessments that better predict on-the-job performance. + Evaluate individual potential through problem-solving tasks and technical demonstrations. + Enable diverse talent entry through multiple access points regardless of prior educational background. + Create targeted outreach initiatives to attract candidates from non-traditional backgrounds.
Create comprehensive support networks	+ Develop buddy systems with experienced staff members separate from line management. + Form cohort-based learning communities where apprentices "grow together" through shared experiences. + Conduct regular structured progress reviews against clear development objectives and timelines. + Provide dedicated support for academic components of apprenticeships, including study time and resources. + Establish "apprentice community" spaces for peer interaction and support. + Implement mentoring schemes with technical staff who have progressed through similar pathways.
Establish cross-sector collaboration frameworks	+ Develop rotation schemes between academic and industry settings to broaden experience and skills. + Share best practices through formal networks, conferences and communities of practice.

	+ Build bridges for apprentices to transition between organisations (e.g., "ICR apprentice moving to AstraZeneca").
Advocate collectively for policy change	+ Form united coalitions of research organisations to amplify influence on funding bodies. + "Request change together" to reform funding mechanisms that currently disadvantage technical career paths. + Promote the value of technical career pathways alongside academic routes through evidence-based advocacy. + Establish "trailblazers" to lead innovation in apprenticeship development for research environments.
Align HR practices with apprenticeship needs	+ Challenge traditional academic requirements that create unnecessary barriers to entry. + Develop alternative assessment methods focused on aptitude and potential rather than prior attainment. + Create role definitions that properly utilise the wide range of skills apprentices develop. + "Change the mindset of HR" around qualification requirements and progression metrics.
Provide adequate compensation	+ Offer competitive "normal wages", reflecting that apprentices are performing core roles in research. + Recognise the unique contributions of technically-skilled staff to research outcomes. + Benchmark salaries appropriately across career stages and in relation to comparable industry positions. + Create clear financial progression linked to qualification attainment and skill development. + Avoid treating apprentices as peripheral trainees when they are integral to research operations.

3 Conclusion and next steps

Scientific apprenticeships represent a valuable approach to developing skilled, diverse research talent by combining academic learning with practical experience, benefiting both individuals and institutions. As demonstrated throughout the conference, these programmes can address technical capability gaps, enhance institutional reputation, foster cross-sector collaboration and improve diversity in research settings.

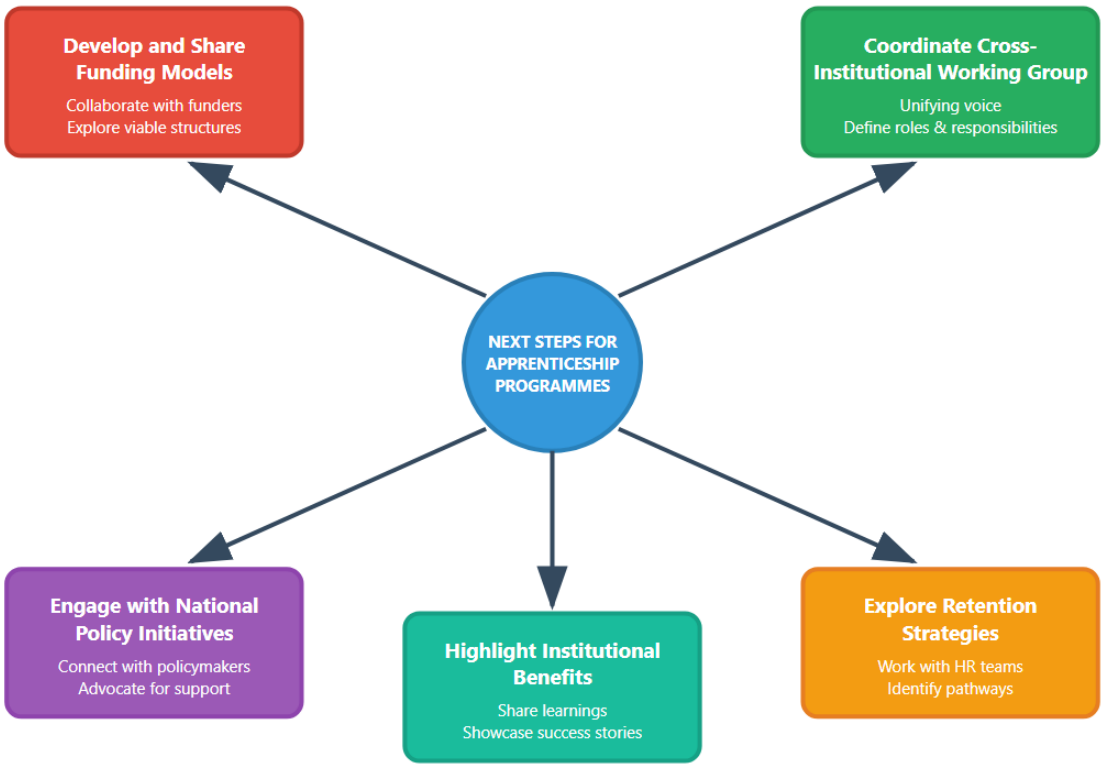
However, significant barriers remain, including complex funding mechanisms, administrative demands, misalignment between apprenticeship standards and research roles, unclear career progression pathways, and traditional recruitment mindsets that prioritise academic credentials over practical potential. Addressing these challenges requires strategic planning, cross-sector collaboration, reformed recruitment practices and sustainable support systems.

The future focus should be on greater collaboration, clearer guidance and policy refinement to embed and expand apprenticeships in the research sector. The conference demonstrated that by working together, organisations can overcome common challenges and create more effective pathways for technical talent in research.

The Scientific Apprenticeship Conference hosted by the ICR marks an important step in this collaborative journey, bringing together diverse stakeholders to share experiences, identify challenges and develop collective solutions.

Below are the next steps and key actions required to establish and expand successful apprenticeship programmes across sector (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Next steps and key actions



+ Develop and share funding models

Organisations should collaborate closely with funders to explore viable funding structures that can sustain apprenticeship programmes in research environments. This includes investigating innovative models such as centralised apprenticeship pools that could serve multiple institutions or developing internal resourcing systems that integrate apprenticeship costs into regular operational budgets. By working directly with funding bodies, institutions can identify sustainable financial frameworks that support long-term programme viability.

+ Coordinate a cross-institutional working group

Establishing a unified working group or network is essential to create a coordinating voice that can drive this initiative forward effectively. This group should identify key stakeholders across institutions and clearly define roles and responsibilities for advancing apprenticeship programmes. Having a structured coordination mechanism will ensure consistent progress and prevent fragmented efforts across different organisations.

+ Engage with national policy initiatives

Active engagement with policymakers and key stakeholders is crucial for securing structural support for apprenticeships at a systemic level. This involves connecting with relevant government departments, policy bodies, and industry associations to advocate for regulatory frameworks and funding mechanisms that facilitate apprenticeship integration into research and SME sectors. Building these policy connections early will help create an enabling environment for programme expansion.

+ Explore retention strategies

Working collaboratively with HR teams across institutions will help identify clear pathways for retaining apprentices after programme completion. This includes developing career progression routes, creating permanent positions that leverage apprentices' specialised skills, and establishing mentorship programmes that support long-term career development within research organisations.

+ Highlight institutional benefits

Sharing comprehensive learnings from existing programmes, including both positive outcomes and areas needing improvement, will support sector-wide knowledge development and programme enhancement. Organisations should actively showcase success stories and document team-level impacts to build internal support and provide evidence-based justification for future investment in apprenticeship programmes.

The enthusiasm and commitment demonstrated by participants suggests growing recognition of the importance of technical talent in research and the value of apprenticeships in building sustainable pipelines for these vital roles.

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5 Appendix A: Participating organisations

The conference brought together representatives from 34 organisations across academia, industry, funding bodies and policy sectors:

1. Advance HE
2. AstraZeneca
3. Babraham Institute
4. BioAscent
5. Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council
6. Broad Associates Limited
7. Brunel University of London
8. Charles River Laboratories
9. Cancer Research UK
10. CSR Scientific Training
11. Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
12. The Francis Crick Institute
13. The ICR
14. Imperial College London
15. Institute for Apprenticeships/Skills England
16. King's College London
17. Loughborough University
18. Manchester Metropolitan University
19. MedCity
20. MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology
21. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew
22. Royal Society of Chemistry
23. Science Apprenticeship Forum
24. Science Council
25. SRG

26. Strategic Board for Skills Advancement
27. Sutton Council
28. Tiro
29. UK Research and Innovation
30. University College London
31. University of Birmingham
32. University of Essex
33. University of Oxford
34. Wellcome Trust

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